

Colette Paul

## DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL

James pops into the toilet just before six and when he comes out the office is empty, all the lights are off. He can't believe it. He goes to the door and shakes it gently, even though he can see that the grille is pulled down. He laughs a bit, to try and reassure himself. He's beginning to feel a sinking sort of panic. 'Hello?' he shouts, quietly at first. 'Hello, is anyone there?' It's pitch dark apart from the red lights of the alarm. There are nine of them in the office. How could no one have noticed he was missing? He usually walks to the bus stop with a few of them. He tells himself to stay calm. He turns off the alarm and pushes the light switch. The flat fluorescent tubes buzz on, one by one. The office is down a lane overlooking a disused railway line, tucked away from the main road. There's no reason for anyone to pass by.

He sits down at his desk. He needs to work out what to do. He doesn't have his boss's home phone number. He can't call the police or the fire brigade, not for something as daft as this. Once he's accepted that he's stuck here for the night, the prospect is not so bad. There's no one waiting for him at home, and he doesn't have any plans for the evening. His only worry is what his work colleagues will say. They already have him pegged as an eccentric: they'll think this is a great story, him getting locked in for the night. They still laugh about the Christmas party when he choked on a rogue bay-leaf in his soup. Fortunately he'd been clear-minded enough to perform the Heimlich manoeuvre on himself by running to the restaurant staircase, coming down the railing on his stomach, then using the banister post as a fist. 'It could only happen to you, James,' said Robbie, the man he sits beside. 'Whooshing down the banister like that.' He doesn't know how or when it happened, but he seems to have been allocated the role of office clown. He decides he'll hide in the toilet in the morning and emerge when everyone is in the kitchen, making coffee.

It's now quarter to seven. He walks upstairs to the kitchen and makes a cup of black tea. Recently he's been regulating his diet, trying to avoid wheat and dairy on the advice of a Chinese herbalist he's started visiting. He often feels sluggish; he gets bad stomach pains. Sometimes he wakes up in the middle of the night, his heart beating too fast. His doctor can't find anything wrong with him, and he suspects that she thinks he's a hypochondriac. He thinks she's probably right, but it doesn't help alleviate his anxiety. It's got worse since the choking incident. In idle moments he'll find himself wondering how long it would take to discover his body if he choked one night and couldn't save himself. He's in regular contact with his parents, and Mr Brewer, his boss, would probably phone after a day or two. He couldn't count on his neighbours noticing anything. Apart from the man upstairs, he doesn't know what his

neighbours look like, and he only knows the man upstairs because he flooded him on Christmas Eve. He's an alcoholic, skinny, stooped, his face caved in with emphysema. At night James hears him coughing through the ceiling.

He drinks his tea, then turns on his computer. He may as well catch up on some work. But tonight his powers of concentration fail him. The quietness distracts him. He imagines the bars and nightclubs and cinemas filling up, people thronging the streets. A group of them from university used to meet up at the Fox and Hound every Friday, but this year their arrangement has finally fallen apart: Andy and Dave have moved to London, and Kev has got a girlfriend. It was James who spotted her first, at the wedding of another university friend. Emma was dancing with one of the children, birling her round, laughing. She was very fair, with an appealing mild, round-chinned face. Her cheeks were pink with exertion, her hair flying around. This image of her in motion, her old cardigan flapping behind her, has stayed, imprinted, in James's mind. He can recall it at will. He was surprised, when he came back from the bar, to see Kev talking to her. Kev usually went for the most attractive women in the room, and Emma was not pretty in the conventional sense. (James likes to think he has unique taste.) She came back to sit at the table and Kev introduced her, but it was noisy and James couldn't join in on their conversation. He spoke to her heavily made-up friend, whose failed attempts to overcome her awkwardness matched his own. She pulled at her sparkly dress, which was too tight, and gulped down drinks while making sarcastic comments about the couple getting married. In an odd way, he felt they recognised each other, and were disheartened by what they saw. He left early and the next time he saw Kev, Emma was his girlfriend.

A few months ago they moved in together, and at the weekend James often goes round for dinner, or to watch a DVD. These evenings – even the thought of these evenings – both sustain and pain him. Emma quizzes him about his love life, half-seriously, in the way that you might tease a younger brother, and says she will set him up. She is only twenty-three, nine years younger than them, but she seems older. She has painted Kev's living room yellow, and bought cushions for the couch, a picture of waterlilies for over the mantelpiece. She sits between them, linking her arms through theirs. There is a note of sheer physical pleasure in all her movements that James finds attractive. He's never felt at home in his body. Sometimes she lies back on the sofa, resting her feet on his knees. She has small white feet, with squarish toenails. One night last month she asked James to massage them, talking in that light, playful way she has to him. James became angry. He wasn't a eunuch, he wasn't a monk. He felt he was being used, although he didn't know to what end, and he didn't know what to do about it. It wasn't to make Kev jealous. He sat in the La-Z-Boy, smiling benignly and strumming his guitar. That night James decided that he'd had enough. He'd rather spend his weekends alone. But at the door Emma said, 'Are you okay? You look fed up,' and she seemed genuinely

concerned. He said yes, just tired, you know how it is. She gave him a hug. 'You know you can come over anytime,' she said. 'I feel that me and you are friends now, you know, apart from Kev.' And he said yes, I feel that too.

At thirty-two, he has not had much experience with women. His longest relationship, in fourth year at university, lasted eight months, and ended badly – for him, anyway. 'I'm sorry, James, but now that we've got to know each other, I find you quite boring,' she'd told him one afternoon in the student union. He had not protested. 'I used to think you were mysterious,' she continued, 'but you're just quiet.' Actually for the last few months he'd been in the process of going off her, but he forgot that once she finished with him. He stopped going to his history lectures in order to avoid her. (He'd ended up with a 2:2, scuppering his chances of doing a PhD.) Things had only looked up once he met Camilla. They worked together in Waterstones the year after he'd graduated. She was in the Socialist Workers Party, the Smash the Nazis, and the Palestine Solidarity Campaign. James had never belonged to a club, but he was impressed by her moral confidence. He went leafleting with her a few times, and attended one meeting of the Palestine Solidarity Campaign, where it was decided that volunteers would boycott an Israeli pianist who was playing at the Royal Concert Hall. She hadn't replied to their email asking if she supported their cause.

He watched the films Camilla recommended, and read the books she mentioned. He found her absolutism bracing. His problem, she told him, was that he could see all sides of an argument. He enjoyed being told what he was like, even if it wasn't complimentary. No one had ever paid so much attention to his personality. He even enjoyed being told what to think: all he had to do in her company was breathe. After spending an hour with his parents at his birthday she said, 'Your mother's depressed and you're father refuses to acknowledge it. He's very controlling.' Until that point he'd thought, if he'd thought about them at all, that they were happy.

In fact his parents' separation had coincided with the end of his relationship with Camilla. After the summer she'd started teachers' training, and he saw her less. She began to cancel their dates, and when they did meet up, she seemed withdrawn. James didn't broach the matter: he was afraid. Finally, over the phone, she'd told him she couldn't make him happy. James said she did make him happy. She begged him not to make this any harder than it already was, and said she hoped they could stay friends. The next week, in the spirit of friendship, he bought her an expensive biography of Karl Marx for her birthday. He went to her house to deliver it, but she was out and he had to leave it with her flatmate. When he didn't hear from her, he began to worry that the flatmate had forgotten to pass the book on, or even stolen it. Why else would Camilla not have contacted him? He tried to call, but she didn't pick up the phone. One night after the Fox and Hound he stood under her lit

window shouting, 'I'm not drunk, I just want to talk to you,' until her flatmate said he was obviously unbalanced, she'd call the police if he didn't go away.

There's been no one since. Recently, under Emma's persuasion, he signed up for a free three-month trial with *Guardian Soul Mates*. Even before it got to the meeting-up stage, he had two automated rejections and one strange message reading: *Sorry to learn about your disability. I probably won't choose to have a relationship with you. But I feel sorry for you and will pray for you.* None of the three dates he's been on has come to anything. The first woman ('Literary, lively & a few pounds overweight!') emailed him the next day to say she thought he was a nice person, but that she hadn't felt any chemistry. The second woman ('Shy but picky. Hates litterbugs & liars') talked bleakly about her ex-boyfriend all night. None of their photos matched the reality by a long shot. James had picked an unflattering snap of himself, feeling that there was nothing to be gained in gilding the lily; nevertheless, he'd registered date number two's disappointment as he approached her. 'I usually go for tall men,' she'd told him. 'You looked tall in your picture.' (She'd looked a glamour-puss in *hers*.) The third date, last weekend, was the worst yet. She had emailed him on Friday to say that her dentures were being repaired, would he mind if she came without them? His heart sank. No, he wrote back, he didn't mind. They arranged to meet in Beanscene at seven o'clock. He sat near the door, fighting the temptation to look up every time it opened. She hadn't turned up by eight, when he ordered another coffee, or at quarter to nine, when he decided to go home. Later that night, just before he went to bed, he got a text message: *Sorry, I fell asleep on the train. Just got home. Sorry x. Sorry x. Sorry.* For some reason, he's been unable to laugh about the incident. Even just thinking about it fills him with a nameless horror, a hopelessness that cuts across his soul.

It's eleven o'clock now, quiet apart from the soft swoosh of traffic passing by in the distance. He walks round the office, trying to keep warm. It'll be Christmas in two weeks, and then there'll be the ordeal of Christmas Day, of trying to arrange things so that he sees both of his parents and neither feels left out. His mother is less of a problem because she's got her new husband, Philip. James tries to find fault with him, out of loyalty to his father who hasn't got over their separation. He was forty-five when he married James's mother, reconciled to being alone. Now, at seventy-seven, he is back to square one – or so it seems to him. Nothing can console him. He has become loquacious in his grief – to his family, to strangers, to his church buddies. He is not ashamed to admit he still loves James's mother, will always love her, would have her back in a flash. Often his eyes well up before he has time to wipe them. People feel sorry for him – James feels sorry for him, and guilty too. The idea of his father's loneliness nags away at him. But he also realises that, in some perverse way, his father is enjoying himself. He

has taken to victimhood like a duck to water. Even his walk seems calculated to suggest a poor soul, a poignant figure barely holding himself together. James has many thoughts that he tries to censor from himself, and this is one of them. He feels it exposes some fundamental personality flaw in his father; something shameful, weak, unmanly.

He makes himself another cup of tea, and eats a few digestives from the communal biscuit tin. He feels even hungrier afterwards and has a look in the fridge. There's a few microwave meals, but they have the owner's name printed on them in warning capital letters. After the Strawberry Müllerlight fiasco, he wouldn't risk it. He's just about to turn off the light, when he hears a scream. At first he thinks it's a woman. He rushes over to the window and lifts the blind, his heart thumping. But it's a fox, a big one, stalking up and down by the rubbish bins. He watches it move in and out of the darkness. The screams are spaced out, as if waiting for a response. He's only ever caught quick glimpses of foxes, never anything like this. It's eerie. He begins to feel as if the cries are getting under his skin, entering his bones. He watches for a long time but no other foxes appear.

Afterwards he feels unsettled. He goes downstairs and walks around the empty office, up and down, up and down. The quietness is that frozen, charged kind that feels like the aftermath of something. His sense of unreality is so strong that for a moment he imagines himself dead. He thinks about what he would regret, if the next few hours were all that remained of his life. And it's then, feeling a loneliness too absolute to bear, that it comes to him: he must tell Emma how he feels. He picks up his mobile phone and stares at the screen. As if on cue, it begins to ring.

'Frank?' a woman says. 'Frank, is that you?'

His head is so full of Emma that he feels momentarily disorientated. 'You've got the wrong number,' he says.

'This isn't Frank?' the woman says. 'Who is this?' There are people talking in the background, and music. Before he can answer, she says, 'Please, Frank, I just want to talk.' Her voice is slurred and he realises she's very drunk. 'I know you're there,' she says.

He tells her again that she has the wrong number, that there's no one called Frank here.

'Who are you?' she says.

'I'm James,' he says.

'Please, James,' she says. 'I need to talk to him.'

'I'm sorry,' he says, 'he's not here.' The woman has begun to cry. She says something else but he can't make it out. Everything is muffled. He presses the phone hard against his ear.

'Maybe you should try him in the morning,' he says, not knowing how to end the call. She is still crying. 'I need to go,' he says finally. 'I can't really hear you anyway. I'm sorry.' But before he can hang up, the line goes dead.

Afterwards he thinks, for the first time in twenty years, of Frank Ross, a boy he was at school with, who was bullied mercilessly. He was two years above James so they weren't friends; they lived next door to each other. He used to see the McDonald brothers following him home: *I love your trainers, Frank. Frank, I love your anorak. Did your mum get them for you, Frank? Frank, why won't you talk to us? Aren't we good enough for you, Frank?* He wonders what's become of him. He thinks about other people he used to know and wonders where they are now. He remembers his best friend in school, Ben, and how they used to call each other on the phone for hours. What did they find to talk about? There was a girl Ben had a crush on whose favourite term of abuse was *ignoramus*. Her father was an *ignoramus*; the boys in her class were total *ignoramuses*. One Saturday him and Ben and her and her friend took the bus down to Ayr for the day. It was the middle of July, a hot, cloudless afternoon. They raced along the beach, high on the few cans of cider they'd shared. Later on, when Ben and his girl had disappeared, he had his first kiss with her friend. Afterwards they'd sat on the beach wall, big, noisy gulls swooping above them, and James had wanted to put his arm around her. 'Do you see those girls over there?' she'd said. 'They're laughing at me because I'm fat.' And even though he thought she was lovely, he said nothing, because he was shy. She'd got MS, this girl – James remembers someone telling him when he was home from uni. By that point Ben had finished his plumber's apprenticeship, and his girlfriend was pregnant. Their friendship just sort of petered out. James's life went down one path, and Ben's went down another.

He should try to get some sleep. He worries when he doesn't get enough sleep. Such a strange night. His chest is tight, his mind whirring. He turns off the lights, and the darkness surges into him. He puts his head on his desk. His heart is roaring. What if he's having a heart attack? There's a tingling sensation in his arm. He tenses his weight against the darkness.

He wakes up twice. The first time, at three o'clock, he's disorientated. His neck is stiff. He's so cold. A rectangle of flat, white moonlight lies over the carpet. A feeling of utter dereliction takes hold of him. This night will never end. He thinks to himself, *After the night comes the morning. After the night comes the morning.* He remembers it from church.

At five thirty, he wakes again. It's still black outside, but the world is slowly coming into focus. In an hour, an hour and a half, grey light will edge the rooftops. The streets will begin to fill, feet pounding over the wet pavements. He pictures it as he waits for the dawn, as he waits for today to be here.